



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

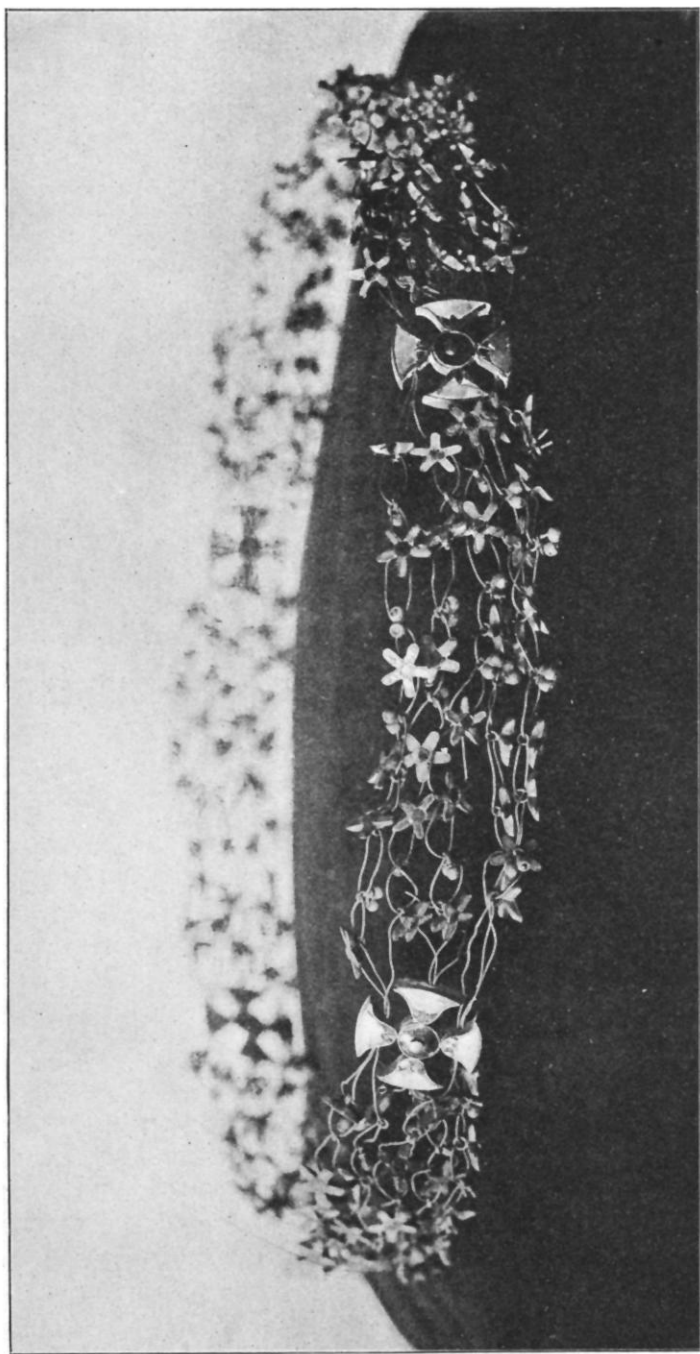
JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE AGE OF ABRAHAM

PROFESSOR A. H. SAYCE, LL.D.
Oxford University, Oxford, England

It is not so long ago since the age of Abraham seemed to belong to a remote, not to say unhistorical, past. The idea indeed still lingers in the minds of those who have not followed the recent discoveries and progress of archæological research, and whose horizon is therefore still limited by the knowledge and beliefs of a decade or more ago. For those, however, whose work lies among the buried ruins of the ancient civilizations of the East, which are being rapidly brought to light by the spade of the excavator and the methods of the new science of archæology, the age of Abraham has become modern rather than remote. When he was born in Ur of the Chaldees, the culture of Babylonia, with its schools and libraries, its thousands of clay books and its numerous scribes, was already immensely old. When he went down into Egypt, it was to a country whose civilization mounted back to a similar antiquity, whose art and literature had already passed their prime, and whose people looked regretfully back to "the good old days."

We are beginning to know more about the age of Abraham than we do about the age of Solon, or even, I may add, the age of Pericles. The multitudes of clay tablets which have been disinterred from the libraries of Babylonia are allowing us to enter into the minutest details of the life of the day. Our knowledge of the time is not confined to the political events which characterized it, or the few prominent individuals who governed the people; but we have come to know how the Babylonian people themselves lived and thought, wrote and spoke. Their law lies before us, almost in its entirety; their manners and customs, their beliefs and practices, their code of honor, their daily life from birth to marriage and death, all have been presented to us, not through the medium of later writers, but at first hand. The revelation has been so marvelous, so unexpected, and so comprehensive that those who have been brought up in the



GOLDEN TIARA OF THE PRINCESS KHNEMET, NEARLY 2000 B.C.

Khnemmet was a princess of the Twelfth Dynasty, the age of Abraham, and this tiara was found in her tomb beside one of the pyramids of Dashûr. It is now in the Museum at Cairo.

old ideas about ancient history and its sources find it difficult to adapt their minds to it. But the revelation has been made nevertheless, and it is only a beginning of yet further revelations that are to come.

Ur of the Chaldees is now represented by the mounds of Mugaiyyar, or Mugheir, on the western bank of the Euphrates. The ruins of its great temple dedicated to the moon-god, like the temple of Harran, in Mesopotamia, still rise loftily above the level of the plain. Before Abraham was born, it had been the seat of a powerful dynasty which ruled Babylonia for many years, and carried its arms as far as Canaan. The city, however, was not inhabited exclusively by Babylonians. Owing to its position, indeed, on the western side of the Euphrates, a considerable part of its population—perhaps the larger part of it—belonged to that western Semitic race of which Abraham himself was a member. In consequence of this fact, it was a busy center of trade. Its ships sailed down the Euphrates into the Persian Gulf; its caravans traveled along the high-roads which led to Syria and Palestine, or to the western and southern coasts of Arabia; and colonies of “Amorite” merchants from Canaan were settled in it as in other cities of western Babylonia.

The fall of the dynasty of Ur had been followed by the fall of the Babylonian empire, and by civil war in Babylonia itself. Rival princes started up in the chief cities of the kingdom and made war one upon the other. The Elamites invaded the country, and an Elamite prince, Eri-aku or Arisch by name, established himself at Larsa, in the southern portion of it, and made himself master of Ur. Northern Babylonia was seized by princes of western Semitic origin, who worshiped the god Samu or Shem, and whose names resemble those which we find in the Old Testament. They made Babylon, which had hitherto been a provincial town, their capital, restoring its great temple of Bel, and fortifying the city itself with walls. While Arisch was ruling at Larsa, the king of Babylon was Khammu-rabi, or Ammu-rapi as he is also called—a form of the name which, with the addition of *ilu*, “god,” frequently attached to it by the deified king and his subjects, has become the Amraphel of Genesis. Both kings were vassals of Elam, whose sovereign had entered into the inheritance of the Babylonian empire.

Such was the political situation when Abraham’s father migrated

to Harran. Between Harran and Ur he would have found but little difference. Both cities were dedicated to the worship of the same god—indeed, many scholars believe that Harran was a colony of Ur—and they were inhabited by the same population, who spoke the same language, obeyed the same laws, and acknowledged the same government. It may be that the civil discord in Babylonia, or the capture of Ur by Arisch, was the immediate cause of the migration. But more probably it was merely a question of trade; the cuneiform tablets show us that there was constant commercial intercourse between Babylonia on the one side, and Mesopotamia and Syria on the other, and that, while Babylonian merchants settled in Syria, Syrian or Canaanitish merchants settled in Babylonia. As today, they went wherever they could find the best market for their wares.

The name of Abram, by which Abraham was known among his own people, is met with in the legal documents of his age. In a contract that was written not many years before he was born, one of the witnesses is an "Amorite" from Canaan who is called Abi-ramu or Abram. These contracts are full of names which are familiar to us from the pages of Genesis. Thus we find among them Ya^cqub-ilu, sometimes contracted into Ya^cqubu, or Ya^cqub, better known to us as Jacob. This latter name seems to have been pretty common in the age of Abraham, though it passed out of use at a later date.

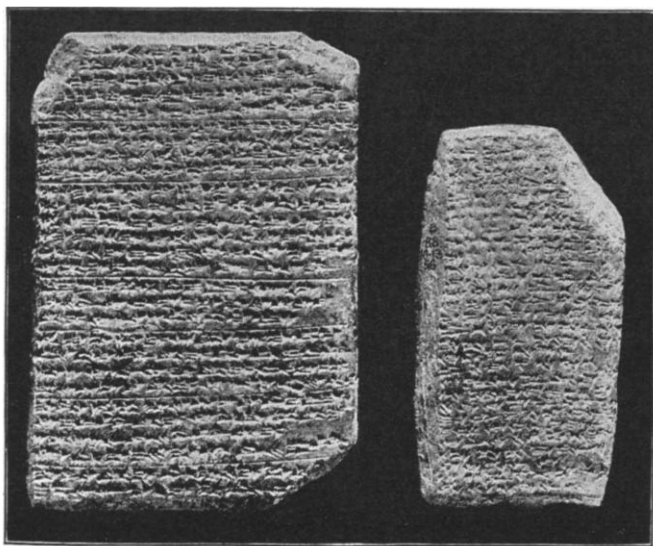
In moving to Canaan, Abraham would not pass beyond the reach of the Babylonian government. Canaan was a province of the Babylonian empire, and on a monument now in the British Museum the only title given to his contemporary Khammu-rabi is that of "king of the land of the Amorites," as Canaan was called at the time by the people of Babylonia. For centuries Babylonian soldiers and traders had been traversing the highroads which led to the West; Babylonian officials ruled in Palestine, and the official script of Canaan, and even the official language, were Babylonian. The literature, theology, and traditions of Babylonia had been carried to the shores of the Mediterranean, where Nebo and Dagon, Hadad and Ashtoreth, were as well known as they were in Babylonia itself, and where the Babylonian theories of creation, which made the deep the origin of all things, had become, as it were, domesticated. The

same law that was in force in Babylonia was in force also in Canaan; the imperial taxes were paid into the same treasury, and there were the same level of culture, and the same habits and customs, in both countries. How close the tie was between them is illustrated by a little tablet of clay that was found in the Lebanon. It belongs to the reign of the son and successor of Khammu-rabi, and contains a notification of the way in which the year in which it is dated was to be officially designated. Such notifications were sent by the central government to all its functionaries at the beginning of each year, accurate dating of documents being especially necessary among so highly commercial a people as the Babylonians. It was needful that there should be no difficulty in looking up the date of a legal or commercial document, and no doubt about its exactness.

In passing to Canaan, therefore, Abraham would only have been like an Englishman who emigrates to an English colony. His surroundings remained the same; he was not even required to learn a new language or a new system of writing. The weights and measures, which were identical with the coins of the period, were the same as those to which he had previously been accustomed; if he wanted to buy land, or even to hire a servant, the legal procedure and forms were those of the country of his birth. He would have found himself no stranger in the land of the Amorites, but a fellow-subject of the same imperial power.

All this is part of the new facts which we have learned from the recent discoveries of archæology, and it sets the history of Abraham under a wholly new light. Except when he paid a visit to the Egyptian court, which at that time was Canaanitish, in all his migrations he never left the confines of the empire in which he had been born, nor passed beyond the influences of the highly developed literary culture of Babylonia. For, like the contemporaneous culture of Egypt, the culture of Babylonia was pre-eminently literary. Books, schools, and libraries were of its very essence. A knowledge of reading and writing was more widely spread than in the England of the Georgian era, and it was a knowledge that could be acquired only by the expenditure of much time and labor. The cuneiform system of writing is a very complicated one; instead of a simple alphabet, hundreds of characters have to be learned, each of which possesses

more than one phonetic value, and can be used also to express words as well as syllables. The pupil, moreover, had to acquire at least two languages: not only the Babylonian which was spoken by the Semitic population, but also the old Sumerian, which was to Babylonian what Latin is to English, and in which a good deal of the earlier literature of the country was written, while law and theology, with their usual conservatism, still employed it in the law courts and



TABLET FROM TEL-EL-AMARNA, 1450 B. C.

temples. It is not wonderful, therefore, that in most cases the Babylonian city had its library to which a school was attached; and wherever Babylonian culture extended, the school and the library accompanied it. Like Babylonia, the Canaan of Abraham must have possessed its schools and libraries, where the cuneiform syllabary of the ruling power was taught and learned, and where the clay books of Babylonia could be stored.

Such a library existed, no doubt, in the town of Kirjath-Sepher—or rather Kirjath-Sopher, “the City of the Scribe,” as we gather from an Egyptian papyrus that it ought to be called—which was also known as Kirjath-Sannah, “the City of Instruction.” And though a library has not yet been found, one of the old archive chambers of Canaan

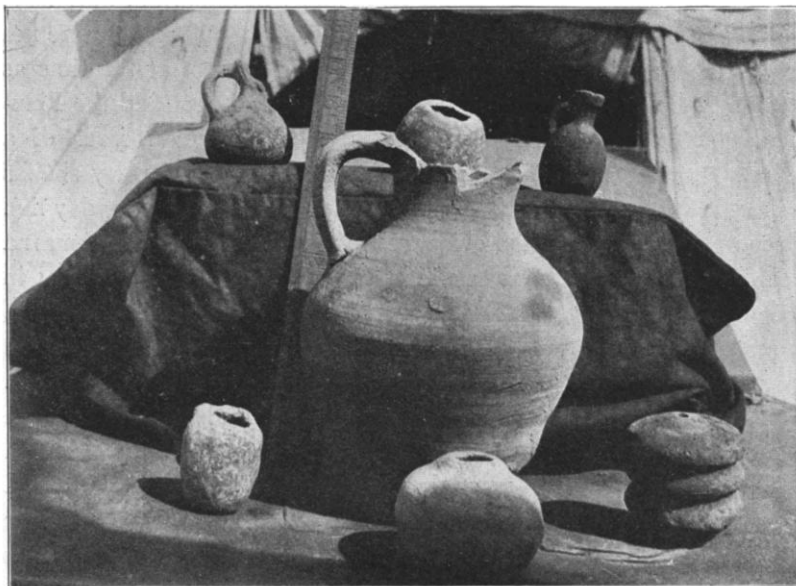
has lately been discovered at Taanach by the Austrian excavator, Dr. Sellin. Inside the great terra-cotta coffer which served as a bookcase or safe, the letters had been deposited which passed between the local shêkhs, together with the official documents of the town. It is needless to say that they were all alike in the language and script of Babylonia.

The discovery settles once for all one or two important questions. First of all, it shows that the cuneiform script and language were not only employed for foreign correspondence, but were at the time as native to Canaan as the so-called Phœnician alphabet and the Phœnician or Hebrew language were in later days. The records of a third-rate town like Taanach were kept in them, and petty shêkhs wrote in them to one another about the trivial affairs of everyday life. Secondly, it completes the evidence furnished by the Tel el-Amarna tablets that education was as widely extended in Canaan as it was in Babylonia; officials, merchants, land-owners, even Bedouin shêkhs, were all alike expected to be able to read and write. Education in the East is immensely old; it is only the West that has been illiterate.

The trade of Canaan was principally an inland one. There were excellent roads in western Asia, and even a postal service, which had been organized as far back as the time of Sargon and his son Naram-Sin, the Babylonian conquerors of Palestine and the Sinaitic peninsula nearly two thousand years before Abraham's age. Along these highroads caravans passed backward and forward from Mesopotamia and Babylonia, and the incense-bearing districts of southern Arabia. There was intercourse also with the northern part of Asia Minor. It was from hence that the painted pottery was derived which has been found at Lâchish and Gezer; and we learn from an Egyptian monument now in Paris that Hittites from this same region beyond the Halys were already settled in the south of Canaan in the time of the Twelfth Dynasty, some two or three centuries before the birth of the Hebrew patriarch. In Abraham's age Egypt was under the rule of Canaanitish conquerors, and had thus become little more than an appanage of southern Palestine.

Of maritime trade in the Canaan of Abraham archæology has thus far discovered but little trace. In the century before the Exodus, indeed, the commercial wealth of Tyre was already cele-

brated, and the fleets of Arvad sailed over the Mediterranean; but all this seems to have been subsequent to the time when Abraham entered Palestine. Whereas in Egypt the products of Crete and the Ægean islands were brought to the Nile from the earliest period, while chemical analysis has shown that part of the gold of the Sixth Dynasty was imported from Asia Minor, in Canaan there is no sign



POTTERY FROM EXCAVATIONS AT GEZER

or vestige of commercial intercourse by sea. It is not till we come to the age of iron, in the days when the descendants of Abraham were settled in the land of Goshen, that we find the princes of Canaan drinking from goblets of gold or silver that had been wrought by Cretan artists, or Cyprian workmen imitating the seal-cylinders of Babylonia. So far as we can judge at present, Canaanitish trade in the time of Abraham was wholly by land.

It was in the life-time of Abraham that the great code of laws¹ was compiled by his contemporary Amraphel, a copy of which has recently been discovered and is now in the Museum of the Louvre. Some time after the Canaanitish campaign to punish the rebellious

¹ Commonly called the Code of Hammurabi (Khammurabi); cf. p. 250.

vassal princes of the bitumen district near the Dead Sea, Amraphel succeeded in overthrowing the Elamite domination in Babylonia, in capturing Larsa, the capital of Arisch, and making himself sole and independent sovereign of the Babylonian empire. One of his first acts after this achievement was to undertake the codification of Babylonian law. The various systems of law in use in Babylonia and other parts of the empire were compared and unified, and published in a code which all his subjects, Canaanite as well as Babylonian, were called upon to obey. As there was one government, one official language and script, and one system of weights and measures throughout the Babylonian empire, so from henceforward there was to be one system of law. The civilization and culture of western Asia, as well as its political organization, thus became one and homogeneous.

The individual laws of which the code of Amraphel is composed were originally judicial decisions in cases that had been brought before the courts. They thus resembled the laws of the Mosaic Book of the Covenant, which had a similar origin (Exod. 18:26); and it is not surprising, therefore, that their introductory formula should in both instances be the same. In matter and spirit, however, the Mosaic and Babylonian codes differ widely; the code of Babylonia is addressed to the subjects of a wealthy and highly organized monarchy, where the security of property was regarded as of even more value than the life of a man; the code of Moses implies a nomad community of free men, among whom every individual life is of importance, while the rights of property are hardly yet defined. In the book of Genesis, as is natural, it is the code of Babylonia and not that of Moses which is presupposed. The position and treatment of Hagar, for example, are in accordance with its provisions; so, too, is the fact that the house-steward Eliezer was the heir of the childless Abraham.

The commercial transactions of the age are illustrated by Abraham's purchase of the field and rock-tomb of Machpelah. The technical terms for "weighing" or "paying," for "silver" and for "shekels," are of Babylonian origin, and the description of the property is that prescribed by Babylonian law. The mode of witnessing the deed also is that which was usual in the Babylonia of Abraham's age, though not at a later date.

As for military affairs, the Babylonian monarch had at his disposal a standing army, which rested partly on conscription, partly on a sort of feudal service. Certain classes were exempted from the duty of serving in it, but some, if not all, of them were required to provide a fixed number of conscripts for the army in place of themselves. One of the official documents found at Taanach is a list of persons each of whom had to furnish conscripts for the local militia, the number of conscripts being stated in each case. From this we may conclude that the Babylonian military system survived in Canaan down to the age of the Israelitish conquest. The conscripts had a distinguishing dress or mark, and desertion was severely punished. They seem to have received pay while on service, like the foreign mercenaries who were also employed by the Babylonian kings. Like other Babylonian subjects of the upper class, Abraham had his *ḥanîkîm* or "trained conscripts," 318 in number, whom he was bound to send to the imperial army when called upon to do so, though he actually used them to assist the Canaanitish rebels against the Elamite conqueror of Babylonia (Gen. 14:14).

By the side of the army stood the civil administration, served by a multitude of functionaries who formed a bureaucracy under the king. A strong and energetic ruler like Khammu-rabi or Amraphel personally supervised everything, and his private letters which have come down to us show that nothing, however small, escaped his notice. Petitions from peasants complaining of injustice or bribery, details of finance, schemes of irrigation and agricultural improvement, all alike were attended to with painstaking and conscientious industry. How he managed to find time for all that he did is a marvel. Under less able sovereigns the bureaucracy probably had it much their own way. They were divided into different departments, of which the most important were the ministries of finance and justice. The judges appear to have been appointed—or, at all events, confirmed in their appointment—by the king himself, like the other officers of state. The officials to whom the exchequer was intrusted not only received the taxes, but also looked after the royal domains. The taxes were numerous, and in addition to them the subject provinces paid a tribute which was exacted by the governors set over them by the Babylonian government. We possess portions of a cadastral

survey made for the purposes of taxation by one of the governors of "the land of the Amorites" some three or four centuries before the age of Abraham.

How strangely modern this age was in many of its features will have been seen from the foregoing sketch of it. We have still much to learn from archæology, but what we have already learned has obliged us to revise our old judgments and conceptions, and to regard the ancient history of the East with new eyes. Abraham lived in the full glow of an ancient and advanced civilization—a civilization which was essentially literary, and in the literary culture of which he also must have shared. His migration was no adventurous journey into an unknown or barbarous land; he merely removed his residence from one part of the Babylonian empire to the other; and wherever he went he found the same culture, the same highly organized administration, the same laws, weights and measures, the same official language and writing. The Canaan of his day was connected by good roads with all parts of the known civilized world; the rugs and embroideries of Babylonia, the incense and spices of Arabia, the gold and bronze of Egypt, and the pottery of Asia Minor were brought to it by the caravans which month by month traversed the highways of western Asia. And all over this world there were schools and libraries, teachers and pupils, and multitudes of books; while, except in Egypt and possibly Arabia, the books were all written in the same script, if not in the same language.